*mi·grant* noun\ˈmī-grənt\

*a person who moves regularly in order to find work especially in harvesting crops\**

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Elias N., who subsequently dropped out of school, age 16, Plainview, Texas, July 21, 2009

*We miss about 2-3 weeks of school. It starts, then we go back.*

*To me it’s normal because I don’t remember starting on the first day of school.\*\**

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Olivia A., age 14, [who] returns from Michigan to school in Florida late every year.

On her first day at school:

*I felt kind of scared because I didn’t know what to expect because people look at you as kind of dumb. You have to catch up with what other people already know. Every class starts out knowing this stuff. At the end you have exams but you weren’t there. . . . Hopefully it won’t get worse once I’m going into high school. My sister and brother dropped out. They migrated and went to school. My brother dropped out the month we came back. The first time we [migrated]. No one in my family has graduated. My sister barely did grade 8.\*\**

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Jose M., [who] said he starts school when his family goes back to Texas

in November and leaves school early in May to migrate to Michigan:

*I miss about three months and that’s a lot. . . . I’ll do senior year*

*but don’t know if [I] will graduate because I will miss a lot of class.*\*\*

\*Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary Definition of Migrant

\*\*2009 Human Rights Watch Interviews with Migrant Students

**Identification of Migrant Students**

Many have heard or even used the term *migrant* or *migrant student*, but are unaware of the actual qualifications students and their parents must meet in order to be identified as a migrant. To better understand the students I am referring to, it is important that we define who actually qualifies as a migrant student. According to Title I, Part C – The Education of Migratory Children, Section 1309 of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, “migratory child” is defined as:

a child who is, or whose parent or spouse is, a migratory agricultural worker, including a migratory dairy worker, or a migratory fisher, and who, in the preceding 36 months, in order to obtain, or accompany such parent or spouse, in order to obtain, temporary or seasonal employment in agricultural or fishing work — (A) has moved from one school district to another; (B) in a State that is comprised of a single school district, has moved from one administrative area to another within such district; or (C) resides in a school district of more than 15,000 square miles, and migrates a distance of 20 miles or more to a temporary residence to engage in a fishing activity.

(U.S. Department of Education elementary and secondary education, n.d.)

Along with the above-stated qualifications, students may receive services from preschool to age twenty-two or until they graduate, whichever comes first. In fact, many students spend their entire academic career as eligible migrant students (Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009, p. 685). This potentially means that a student who begins services at age three, moves every three years, and is eligible until the age of twenty-two has moved a total of at least six times throughout his school years. According to the US Department of Education, funds for Migrant Education Programs (MEPs) are funneled through the state: “Federal funds are allocated by formula to SEAs [State Educational Agencies], based on each state’s per pupil expenditure for education and counts of eligible migratory children…residing within the state” (U.S. Department of Education elementary and secondary education, n.d.). In other words, states receive the funds from the federal government based on how many students qualify as migrants.

**The Education Gap for Migrant Students**

This constant uprooting from school at least every three years (often much more frequently), along with the ever-present language barrier that already exists, creates a major gap in education. Students continue to fall behind in their studies, become discouraged, and see no point in even trying anymore. Unfortunately, the plight of migrant children is not a problem solely in our state of Michigan. Across the nation, the dilemmas faced by migrant students are substantial, especially high school drop-out rates.

Since migrants are a mobile population – often traveling from Michigan to Texas, from the states to Mexico, or from the states to Central America (I recently had a little boy in my class at the Coloma Migrant Program who was from Guatemala) – keeping records on these students becomes even more complicated. In fact, once students no longer qualify for migrant services, the Office of Migrant Education ceases to follow them (as cited in Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009, p. 706). According to estimations by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Migrant Education, nearly half of all migrant students do not complete high school (as cited in Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009, pp. 684, 706). The California Department of Education revealed that “In California, the state with the largest migrant student population in the country, a 2007 study estimated that drop-out rates among migrant children were well over 50 percent” (as cited in Human Rights Watch, 2010, p. 33). Unless addressed, drop-out rates among migrants will continue to soar.

**Barriers for Migrant Students**

Before identifying what we, as educators, can do to help migrant students, we must identify the barriers that exist for migrant students. Apart from the aforementioned drop-out rates, many other barriers exist to prevent academic achievement for migrant students. Identifying these barriers will help us understand what we can do to promote retention among this mobile population. For migrant students, this mobile lifestyle demands constant adjustments and re-integration into a variety of settings. Along with the mobility issue, migrant students face environmental, communication, academic, and emotional issues.

Although many issues exist for migrant students, I strongly believe these are the five most important areas upon which an educator must focus. When I think of these barriers, I see them not as individual issues which should be dealt with separately, but rather collectively with one impacting another. Instead, the five barriers I have identified should be thought of as a web of interconnected issues, where multiple issues often arise out of another issue. In other words, one barrier is not more important than another, but one barrier may funnel into another barrier. Viewing these barriers as parts to a whole will help educators to better understand migrant students and to more effectively help migrant students be successful in the academic realm.

1. **Frequent Relocations**

The first and foremost barrier that migrant students face is frequent relocations. Because their families are constantly on the move in order to find work, migrant students must uproot themselves several times a year. If no work is available in a certain area, their mothers and fathers pack up the children, leave that area, and travel elsewhere, often crossing state lines in the process. Migrant students are forced to leave virtually everything behind: school, friends, and even family. It does not matter if it is in the middle of the school year. The bottom line is that their parents, who are struggling to provide for their children, say it is time to move.

1. **Living Conditions**

Sub-par environments create another barrier for migrant students. Several aspects contribute to this environmental problem. First, agricultural employers often cannot afford to pay for and provide adequate long-term housing for a large migrant family. The housing where migrants reside is only considered temporary by farmers, since migrants seek seasonal work in numerous locations. Hence, many migrant students and their families live in housing conditions that are less than ideal. For example, an entire family may stay in a cramped, one-room cabin where they share a communal bathroom and a communal shower with other migrant families who live on the camp. Other families may stay in a small trailer with in-door plumbing, which many migrants would consider a luxury.

In an effort to advocate for migrants, I recognize that some farmers do not care about the housing they provide for migrants, so long as their crops are being harvested. Many migrants live in conditions that are nothing less than appalling. However, I want to point out that this housing issue is like two sides of the same coin. Assuming that all farmers provide awful housing conditions for migrants is not only unfair, but also untrue. I was raised on my parents’ fruit and vegetable farm. In fact, I often worked alongside migrant workers and knew most by name. My parents did their best to provide suitable housing for the migrants that worked on our farm. In fact, the migrants we currently have living on our farm all live in trailers with indoor plumbing. However, I know for many this is not the case.

Along with this housing problem, migrants often experience poverty as well. Migrant children may come to school with mismatched clothing or clothing that is inappropriate for that particular season of the year, all because they do not have the funds to pay for suitable attire. I have seen this time and time again at the Coloma Migrant Program where I work during the summer with four, five, and six year olds. Students come in jeans, dress shoes, and a sweater in the middle of the hottest part of July or they wear the same outfit several times during the week just to get by.

1. **Language Learners**

The language barrier is another obvious aspect that affects migrant students. If students cannot understand English, they will struggle to communicate and struggle to comprehend their lessons. Hence, they will fall further and further behind. Can you imagine the frustrations a student experiences when she cannot communicate with other students or with her teacher? A migrant student in elementary may be able to learn English fairly quickly since the language centers of the brain have not fully formed and much of the learning focuses on doing. However, when a student reaches middle school and high school, the language barrier becomes even more challenging since the language centers of the brain have already formed. Also, many teachers assume a migrant student would know English by this age and the reading (such as a Shakespearean text) and writing assignments are often more complicated.

The language barrier can also be a discreet problem because it often disguises itself. Learning a language entails the following skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening (and learning the culture). Students may appear to know English. That is, they can hear someone speaking English, can understand what the person is saying, and can respond in English. In my own experiences working with freshmen and sophomore English language learners at Hartford High School (many of whom were likely settled out migrants), I was surprised that many of them did poorly when it came to writing a paper or reading texts. How could this be? I could communicate perfectly fine with these students. We had conversations. I spoke to them in English, they responded in English, etc. Then the explanation dawned on me. As discussed above, five skills exist when mastering a language. Although these skills are all interconnected, mastering one does not mean they have mastered them all. While they may have mastered the listening and speaking skills, they had not yet mastered the reading and writing skills. This explained their inability to comprehend readings and their inability to write a fluid paper in English.

1. **Academic Catch-Up**

Closely connected with this language barrier is the issue of academics. Although students may begin their school year in one location, they are often uprooted mid-semester to move to another location. Hence, the information these students are learning at their first school is often not assessed, while they are expected to catch up on new information at their new school and be tested on it. In other words, they do not get credit for the information they know, and they are held responsible for the information they do not know. In my opinion, this seems a little backwards. In fact, migrant students are often tested on this information on their semester midterm, which results in a large portion of their grade.

Credit accrual poses another concern when it comes to academic success for migrants. When a student reaches high school, receiving and transferring credits becomes a major issue, especially when dealing with school districts across state lines. When a migrant parent decides to relocate, the child’s education is jeopardized because education does not take priority over employment. Parents sometimes do not consider whether it is academically prudent for the child to leave at that time. Because of this, students often risk losing high school credits that they need in order to graduate, as well as retaking courses when they fall behind. For example, Texas and Michigan have very different graduation requirements. Therefore, due to this curricular disconnect, the chances of drop-out rates increase.

1. **Emotional Struggles**

The aforementioned issues also contribute to another barrier for migrants: emotional issues. Migrant students who move may often feel disconnected from other students because friendships have already been formed when they enter the scene. Combine this feeling with other barriers, such as an inability to communicate or unsuccessful academic performance, and the result is a student with low-self esteem who may see dropping out of school as an option. In fact, researcher Linda Rasmussen (1988) cites several surveys, conducted mostly in the 1980s, that identify factors that strongly correlate with migrant high school drop-out rates. These factors are listed below:

* “failure in classes, dislike of school, and extreme lack of credits” (Morales, 1984)
* “little involvement in extracurricular activities, poor grades, extensive migration, dislike of school, perception of being poorer than other students” (Medina, 1982)
* “limited fluency in English, history of transiency, lack of self‐assurance, support and clarity about goals” (Gilchrist, 1983)
* “perceived lack of family support and financial pressures” (Nelken and Gallo, 1978)
* “overage [referring to a student’s being held back a grade], lack of interest in school, negative parental attitude” (New York State Department of Education, 1965)

While these surveys were conducted decades ago, their relevance to migrant students today still applies. Many feel alienated in the classroom, hopeless over their grades, frustrated regarding their language abilities, and pressured to contribute financially to their families. In fact, Rasmussen states that “Inappropriate age/grade placement…is the highest predictor of dropout behavior, with a 99% dropout rate for students more than one year overage…several studies have revealed that most students leave school in the 9th or 10th grade” (n.d., p. 2). Obviously, students must be reached before they believe dropping out is their only option. In my own experiences teaching freshmen and sophomores at Hartford High School, I have seen the frustrations of numerous migrant students who fall behind in their studies because they have not grasped vital information they need in order to succeed.

**Programs for Migrant Students**

The problems migrant students face are apparent. Throughout the years, the government has put in place programs to help combat the growing issues faced by migrants. The Migrant Education Program’s roots actually stem back to 1965 under the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson and his “war on poverty.” Johnson strove to provide an equal educational opportunity for all students facing severe poverty. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 provided supplemental programs for educational, medical, nutritional, and cultural needs. However, since migrant students continually were on the move, few ever received services because they rarely stayed in the same location long enough in order to be counted as students at the poverty level who were eligible to receive services. As a result, a year and a half later in November of 1966, the government created an amendment to Title I, known as “Programs for Migratory Children,” which were specifically geared for migrant students. The efforts of Michigan Congressman William Ford, who authored the amendment, were instrumental in creating this program and keeping it under Title I so that migrant students would also receive the normal services offered under Title I, which were unrelated to the specific services offered to migrant students (Branz-Spall, Rosenthal, & Wright, 2003, p. 56). The tremendous importance of the Migrant Education Program is apparent since it “has been extended under each reauthorization of ESEA that has followed at intervals of six to eight years. On January 8, 2002, it was given life for another authorization period when President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001” (Branz-Spall, Rosenthal, & Wright, 2003, p. 56).

Today, funds for Migrant Education Programs can be used for nearly any purpose that would contribute to the assistance of migrant students. The U. S. Department of Education’s website lists the following services that appropriately use funds to aid migrant students:

* academic instruction
* remedial and compensatory instruction
* bilingual and multicultural instruction
* vocational instruction
* career education services
* special guidance
* counseling and testing services
* health services
* preschool services

(U.S. Department of Education migrant education, n.d.)

While these are services that school districts can provide for migrants, a teacher may not have the opportunity to contribute to these services. The question remains: what can a teacher do to teach migrant students within his or her classroom? Is it possible for a teacher to have an influence on the money going to migrant students within a school district by talking to appropriate migrant staff personnel?

**Here Today, Gone Tomorrow**

Migrants can be divided into two categories: regular migrants and settled-out migrants. Regular migrants qualify for migrant status because they leave for extended periods of time. Regular migrants can be subdivided further: migrants who take trips of longer durations (i.e. months at a time) and migrants who take trips of shorter durations (i.e. weeks at a time). Settled out migrants, on the other hand, are those students who previously qualified for migrant services based on the definition of migrant in the NCLB Act of 2002 (see above: **Qualifications for Migrant Students**). Often, settled-out migrant students still face some of the same barriers that regular migrant students face, particularly the language barrier.

Back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth. For many regular migrant students, this is a normal part of their lives. They move to Michigan in the spring when the crops are being planted, transferring into public school during the tail end of the first semester where they take midterm examinations on information they have likely not learned. They finish out the academic year and stay throughout the summer, often attending Migrant Education Programs (MEPs) – if a MEP recruiter has found them and obtained the necessary paperwork to enroll them – or working in the fields with their parents to harvest the crops. They begin public school after Labor Day, and stay in school until the end of autumn. By Thanksgiving, their families have packed up and begun the journey back to Mexico to work and visit family for the holidays, often staying until sometime in January as their classmates back in the United States review for midterm examinations. Or perhaps by the end of autumn, their families merely move to another – hopefully, warmer – state in order to find work during the winter season. Either way, these children have missed weeks or even months of school, which consequently causes their grades to suffer. Educators of migrant students face this problem on a continual basis. (Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009, pp. 685-86). I have witnessed this firsthand in my own experience as an educator.

Hartford Public Schools (HPS) in Hartford, Michigan, has an estimated Hispanic population of forty percent. Migrant students comprise approximately twenty-five percent of the student population at HPS, with approximately ten percent at Hartford High School. At the high school, school policy dictates that students withdraw from classes if a student is absent for an extended period of time, as is often the case with migrant students. If students return, they are not responsible for turning in assignments missed while withdrawn from school. Hence, teachers are not required to enter grades for these assignments either, since the students were not technically enrolled at the time. Teachers are, however, required to give students the assignments missed. Although this may make the job of the teacher easier at the time, as a result, students are suffering because their grade is often figured out of fewer points than the other students and they are still responsible for knowing the information that was covered during their absence. This withdrawal and reenrollment is common.

As one can see, problems with this system still exist. For example, ninth grader Gabriel, a student in my freshmen English class who previously qualified for migrant status, suddenly vanished from school with no advance notice. Apparently, his grandfather fell ill and the family left unexpectedly to return to Mexico. In the three or more weeks of his absence, Gabriel missed Act 2 of *Romeo and Juliet*. It is extremely difficult to merely omit an act in a play since all five acts form a cohesive whole as each one builds upon the previous act. It would be similar to skipping a portion of a movie and trying to piece it all together later. Combine this with the already complicated Shakespearean language, which even native English speakers struggle with, and the result is an extremely difficult reading of the text on one’s own.

Unfortunately, Gabriel was still tested on and held responsible for this material when he took the midterm at the end of January. Although Gabriel was given the study guides and the quizzes that the other students had taken, he did not receive any grades for the assignments he missed. As a teacher, I was not required to play catch-up entering grades from weeks ago. As a result, Gabriel, like many of these kids, fell behind. I was definitely willing to work with him or other students before or after school to catch them up, but re-teaching weeks of school is extremely difficult. It is just not the same as having a student in class learning from the teacher as well as his peers. I told Gabriel he should complete the study guide, study as if he were going to take the quiz for real, and then take it to test his knowledge of the material. I know he looked it over, but I am not sure he actually struggled through the study guide as the other students had and grasped all he needed for that particular act. Although Gabriel passed the midterm and the class for the semester, I cannot help believing that his midterm examination grade and his semester grade would have been higher had he been in class for the material.

Freshmen María, a qualified migrant student in my class who is an extremely intelligent and driven young lady, left around Thanksgiving. Thankfully, I had forewarning. Prior to her departure, I tried to gather as much work for her as possible so she did not fall behind. However, I could not predict every activity I would do with my students since this was the first time I had taught *Romeo and Juliet*, and, as all teachers know, lesson plans are ever-changing and ever-evolving, depending on students’ needs.

María was given resources, such as a side-by-side translation of the original text and the modern text. Although this definitely aided in María’s understanding while absent, when she returned, I knew that she did not fully understand what occurred in the play. Reading this on her own was still not the same as being in class. When she returned, I gave her the quizzes we took and she practiced them on her own. María also took the initiative and met with me after school to get help with her study guides and to ask me questions about the quizzes. However, María did not receive credit for the quizzes she missed. This means that her grade at the end of the semester was out of fewer points, an aspect that likely hurt her grade. In the end, María did well on the midterm and in the class, but as I stated before, María is an extremely determined young lady who always strives to receive an A.

Ninth grader Juan, another qualified migrant student in my class and cousin to María, left over Christmas vacation. It was unclear whether Juan would make it back in time for midterms at the end of January, which jeopardized his semester grade in my class as well as in his other classes. Juan is an extremely intelligent young man. Prior to his departure, he had a solid B in my class. My hope was that he would return before midterm examinations so that he had enough time to catch up and receive his semester grade. I sent a textbook with him (which Juan promised to bring back), but I did not print the side-by-side translation as I did for María because of the time constraint before he left.

Juan did return about a week before midterm examinations. He told me that he did not understand the material he missed. After I did some explaining to him to summarize what occurred, he did the study guide and looked at the quizzes. He and his cousin María also worked together to complete their assignments and studied together. He was able to learn the material, take the midterm, and receive an A in the class. I believe that, like María, Juan would have succeeded in the classroom regardless of the circumstances. However, some migrant students are not so fortunate.

Graciela, a young lady in my sophomore class, has qualified for migrant services in the past. Around Thanksgiving, Graciela mentioned that she would be gone. However, her departure date continued to move up. With two sophomore classes, but only one set of textbooks for both, I had to copy two entire acts of *The Crucible* so that Graciela could take them to Mexico. I also sent a copy of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with her and tried to predict where we would be when she returned.

Graciela is a student who already struggles in school. I think this is due in part to the language barrier, to an issue with reading comprehension (likely due to the language barrier), to an issue with study skills, and to the mobility issue. When Graciela left, it was detrimental to her academic success. I worked with her to catch her up, allowing her to see the answers to study guides from *The Crucible*. However, I think she felt extremely overwhelmed. I told her to just get the jist of *The Crucible* and focus on that for the midterm (since none of *Huck Finn* would be on the midterm since we had barely started the novel). In the end, Graciela barely passed the midterm and the class. In my book, this is not success since she will continue to struggle in school and barely get by. My desire is that migrant students are not just getting by. If we allow this to happen, they will not succeed in college or in the real world.

**Critical Reflection**

One of the best resources I have found in the research available on migrant education is Michael Romanowski’s “Meeting the Unique Needs of the Children of Migrant Farm Workers” (2003). In his article, Romanowski describes a study conducted with migrant students and teachers during a summer MEP. Romanowski speaks of the importance of “critical reflection,” a term he uses to create awareness among teachers and to reveal the stereotypes they hold toward migrants. I believe this critical reflection is key if teachers are going to work with migrant students in productive, culturally-responsive ways.

Romanowski talks about critical reflection at length in his work. In fact, this critical self-reflection helped teachers in the following ways: teachers recognized their own stereotypes of migrant students and how this affects their teaching, created a plan to deal with these stereotypes, promoted positive attitudes towards migrants and strove to stop the negative attitudes of individuals within the school (including other students, teachers, staff members, administrators, etc.), considered the cultural background of migrants, etc. For example, one teacher held the stereotype that migrant students and their families do not value education or educational opportunities (Romanowski, 2003, p. 29). He believed that this view “lowered his expectation of migrant students, which clearly affected their education” (Romanowski, 2003, p. 29). Reflecting on their own beliefs and recognizing their own biases allows teachers to keep the appropriate views and weed out the inappropriate ones in order to more effectively teach students, including migrants. Although this can often be a painful (because teachers must come to grips with their biases) and painstaking (because teachers must evaluate their views on a continuous basis) process, the outcome is well worth it since educators are able to teach with an attitude of awareness, thus promoting an environment that is conducive to learning for all of their students (Romanowski, 2003, p. 29).

I believe wholeheartedly that teachers must learn as much as they can about migrants’ lives. This was an important feature of Romanowski’s research. A common thread ran through the interviews with the teachers in Romanowski’s study (2003): the importance of taking every opportunity to learn more about migrant students and their culture. Teachers agreed on the following ideas: read literature and the latest studies conducted on migrants, attend conferences or other programs offered to promote understanding of migrants, develop a good rapport with migrant students and their families, incorporate the experiences of migrant students into their classroom writing and activities (Romanowski, 2003, p. 31).

**Five Key Recommendations for Working with Migrant Students**

My own experiences with migrant students, my many conversations with other individuals who work with migrants, along with my reading of works like Romanowski’s, have provided great insights into the lives of migrant students. The recommendations below are five that I believe are essential when it comes to working with migrant students and their families so that migrants can overcome those barriers that were discussed above.

1. **Inform Yourself about Migrants**

Teachers have to take what they know and learn about migrants and incorporate it into the ways they teach and interact with this group of students (Romanowki, 2003, p. 31). A teacher must learn as much as possible about migrant students, the migrant culture, etc. in order to solve the problems that migrants face. In other words, teachers must address a barrier that migrants face, and tailor the way they teach to migrants when necessary. For example, all migrant students face a language barrier at some point in their lives. For those of you who have learned a second language, you know that this is no easy task. As a teacher, learning a few common words or phrases in Spanish can go a long way in breaking down those barriers as well. Additionally, an English teacher who is also fluent in Spanish may be able to capitalize on the similarities between the two languages in order to teach grammar to her migrant students. English grammar might make more sense for migrant students if it is compared to the grammar of their native language of Spanish.

1. **Provide a Troubleshooter to Assist Migrant Students**

Moves throughout the year obviously create a barrier for migrant students, and consistency at school is difficult to obtain. However, Romanowski offers a plan to deal with these inconsistencies. He suggests assigning the same teacher to serve as an advisor to the same migrant student or students every year. Another option is to pair a non-migrant student, who acts as a mentor, with a migrant student. In this way, migrant students and their families can develop a relationship with one individual, whether a teacher or a student, who will assist in making the moves from one school to another smoother (2003, p. 31).

While I whole-heartedly support Romanowski’s idea here, I believe schools with a high population of migrant students could even go a step further by establishing a paid position for an individual who advocates for migrant students. For example, Hartford High School has an individual in place to do just that. Whenever I faced a concern with a migrant student, I turned to Rick Ward, the Instructor of English Language Acquisition. His office is located in the Counseling Office, which allows for an easy flow of information if a problem occurs. Rick serves as a troubleshooter between students, parents, and teachers. He provides translating services for students (such as when they are taking a test) and parents alike. Whenever I spoke with Rick, he always had good insights to provide and could tell me about the migrant students.

The Coloma Migrant Program, a six-week summer school where I have worked, has a similar position in place: a Recruiter/Translator. This individual serves as a troubleshooter as well. She actually travels to the camps and talks to the parents in order to inform them about the summer school, which runs from eight in the morning until two in the afternoon. Additionally, she translates in a variety of capacities, such as phone calls, letters to parents, etc. This individual is Hispanic as well. I think this is a definite plus as it provides a further bridge to reach the migrant population. Even if a school cannot provide a specific individual to troubleshoot for migrant students, connecting migrant students with a teacher or community member who is Hispanic can also make a huge difference.

Along with individuals who aid in the transitional process, computer programs that provide a mechanism for transfer of student information can also offer some consistency as well. Each school district is responsible for entering the academic information (such as credits achieved) on migrant students. Romanowski describes the Migrant Student Record Transferring System (MSRTS), which is the forerunner to the Migrant Student Information Exchange (MSIX), the current system used today:

The MSIX “is a web-based portal that links states’ migrant student record databases to facilitate the national exchange of migrant students’ educational among the states…MSIX does not replace existing state migrant student record systems; rather, it links them in a minimally invasive manner to collect, consolidate, and make critical education data available. MSIX leverages available information provided by states to the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED) Education Data Exchange Network (EDEN) system to ease the data collection burden on states.

(*What is MSIX?*, 2008)

An exchange system like this allows teachers and other school personnel to see where students are in their academics.

1. **Create a Classroom Environment Where Migrant Students Feel Included**

Imagine moving to a different school several times a year. This means new teachers, new students, and new curriculum. Migrant students may feel extremely alone and isolated during this time, since friendships among students have already been formed. A positive atmosphere will help students adjust to their new environment more easily. This means that a teacher cannot and will not tolerate any forms of prejudice and will do everything in her power to advocate for the migrant student (Romanowski, 2003, p. 31).

Migrant students often have low self-esteem. Teachers must create opportunities for migrant students to be a part of a group and succeed as well. Migrant students need to feel that their ideas and contributions are valued. When migrant students are forced to leave the classroom to receive “special assistance,” their self-esteem is negatively affected. Teachers must do all they can to keep migrants integrated into the regular classroom. Activities such as cooperative learning create environments where migrant students can thrive because they can be encouraged and supported. Cooperative learning also allows migrants to work with and learn from their peers, which will help to develop positive relationships across cultural lines (Romanowski, 2003, p. 32).

My first year at the Coloma Migrant Program, I witnessed a case of low self-esteem with Felipe, a young boy in my four, five, and six-year-old classroom. Felipe did not know any English when he came to the school. He did not know any Spanish either; he spoke a totally different language, Mesteco. Even the translator and his Spanish-speaking classmates had a difficult time communicating with him. He also had some hearing and learning disabilities. Each day as we learned a new letter of the alphabet and the sound it made, Felipe struggled to pay attention and do the assignments, which many of his classmates sped through easily with minor help. At first, he could not recognize the letters. I would say the letter and its sound repeatedly, taking his hand and tracing the letter and circling the letters he was supposed to find.

Finally, Felipe began to understand. I first noticed one day when we were doing the “Zoo Phonics” song, an exercise where the children sing the sound of a letter and perform a motion to accompany it. By the end of the program, the boy who could not even write his name when he first came, could write most of the letters of his name and generally keep them in the correct order as well. He could recognize and circle the daily letter in the assignments.

1. **Reach the Parents of Migrant Students**

I have seen the fear that migrant students face when they enter the classroom for the first time. For example, at the Coloma Migrant Program, many young children come in to the program petrified because they are uncertain of many aspects, including the language, the teacher, etc. I can only imagine that their parents are terrified as well. Romanowski speaks about the anxiety felt by migrant students and their parents. Many parents may feel awkward because they have trouble communicating in English and have not completed high school themselves. Establishing a good rapport with migrant students and their migrant parents is key in gaining their trust. For example, simple aspects such as translating a letter home can help to open the doors in making migrant families feel welcome. Teachers can also do their part by arranging to meet at a time convenient to the parents, addressing issues that affect migrants, and stressing the importance of migrant parents in their student’s education (Romanowski, 2003, p. 32).

Every year at the Coloma Migrant Program, we have a Fiesta. This Fiesta serves as an open house that the parents can come to, eat a nice meal, and see their child’s classroom and the work he/she has done at the program. This program is a wonderful time to reach the parents of migrant students. Each year, I take pictures of the students at various activities and include these in a book, which they receive at the end of the program, along with an array of projects they have done in the classroom. Each child receives his very own page with his name, his age, his favorite color, and his favorite food. The rest of the book is composed of collages of pictures from the activities, such as field trips, special visitors, etc. Whenever a parent entered my classroom, I made a point to find his child’s individual page and point out any other pictures taken of the student with his classmates. This opens up the door to talk with the parents, especially if they do not speak English. Last year, I had the opportunity to talk with Antonio’s parents, point out his work, pictures, etc. Antonio’s parents spoke very limited English, but I know they appreciated my efforts to have a conversation with them in their native tongue, even though I am sure my Spanish was not perfect.

Another way to create open lines of communication and reduce anxiety amongst parents of migrant students is to make phone calls home. These phone calls can be preventative phone calls, phone calls to address a problem, or phone calls to merely make contact with the parent. I have done this numerous times, often speaking in Spanish, in order to communicate. For those teachers who do not speak Spanish, enlisting the help of an individual who does (such as a discussed in **Provide a Troubleshooter to Assist Migrant Students**), can be another option. Educators must make a concerted effort to connect with migrant students and their parents, even if it is just saying a friendly “hello” in Spanish or getting the assistance of a translator.

1. **Create Culturally Applicable Lessons for Migrants**

Migrants need to feel as if they are being included, and I believe that this can be done by creating lessons to which they can relate. For example, if an assignment is to write about a family tradition, encourage migrant students to write about a tradition that their family does, whether it is “American” or not. Not only does this benefit migrant students, it also benefits non-migrant students because they learn about a different culture.

In the classroom, Romanowski also stresses the importance of teachers striving to reach migrant students by making lessons that are applicable to their students’ lives. He suggests using literature that represents the migrant population. This has a two-fold purpose: not only will migrant students feel like they have a voice, but non-migrant students will learn about the lives of other individuals in another culture. Whenever possible, teachers must include culturally relevant material. For example, migrants often face poverty, continual moves, racial prejudices, etc. If students must complete a research project, allow them to research a topic that they can relate to, such as poverty. Students will identify with an assignment such as this, and it will empower them because they can write about an issue that personally affects their own lives (2003, pp. 31-32).

Migrant students face barriers and possess needs that are unique to this mobile population. They move constantly, live in less-than-ideal environments, struggle to learn English, fall short in their academics, and often experience very emotional lives. Teachers like you and me can do our part to help these struggling students succeed. In order to achieve this, we must stay informed about migrants, seek out individuals in the academic realm to assist migrant students, include – rather than alienate –migrants in the classroom, make a concerted effort to connect with migrant students and their parents, and create lessons that migrant students can apply to their own lives. By serving as their advocates, we can show migrant students we want them to succeed not only in academics but also in life.

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